

## Letter from Alexander Graham Bell to Rebecca E. Sparrow, January 25, 1902

January 25, 1902. Dear Miss Sparrow:—

You say in your note of January 20:—

“When after coming here I became interested in the use of Visible Speech Symbols, and began to use them in my work, I adopted mid-back-wide for a in order that the same symbol might be used for the radical of i as for a. There were two or three other reasons why I liked that better, but I found myself so often obliged to direct the pupil to lower the back of the tongue, that I decided to use [??] instead of [??] in all these sounds [??] and have been doing so for some time Had I known that you had advised [??] I should probably not have made the change, but having done so I wish to make sure that you still think [??] the better. On page 31 of “Principles of Speech” I find this ‘In the vowel ah the lips are fully spread, the tongue lies flat and the whole mouth is in even neutrality between the two modes of vowel formation’. Now this seems to me just what we should insist upon with our pupils, and if this is the position indicated by [??] why not use it?”

There is, of course, a real distinction between [??] and [??] (vowels in ask and ah as we perceive when a man pronounces ask as ahsk), but the distinction is too slight to warrant us in bothering our pupils with it, therefore in writing English words for deaf children I don't think it necessary or advisable to distinguish the two sounds. It is really immaterial which we adopt ( mid-back-wide or low-back-wide. [??] )

My preference for mid-back-wide [??] is that it represents a “mid” position with varieties on either side of it, and we can then use the symbol low-back-wide [??] for the exaggerated position assumed by some children when the tongue is depressed too low in the mouth, and the whole mouth too wide open; while on the other hand, in cases 2 where

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the tongue is not sufficiently depressed we can use high-back-wide [??] If we employ low-back-wide [??] as our standard symbol then we have no symbol to express a still lower position of the tongue.

From the point of view of phonetical spelling, it is quite immaterial whether we use [??] or [??] and I should like to have you use your own judgment. I don't believe it would be a good thing to fix the use of these symbols too closely. We should tolerate differences of usage, especially in the case of large aperture vowels, and diphthongal vowels, for the most extraordinary variations occur in the every day speech of individuals (in respect to these sounds) without exciting comment [??] for [??]

[??] is very good English [??]

So far as the phonetical representation of English goes, it doesn't matter one bit whether we use [??] or [??] or an entirely arbitrary sign. Any form of letter would do perfectly well, so long as each letter represents the same sound, and each sound is always represented by the same character. An entirely arbitrary set of letters would fulfill one object of phonetical printing — the impressing upon the mind of the reader the pronunciation of the words by having them come again and again and again to his eye, clearly expressed in characters that depict the sounds. This object of a phonetic literature can be attained with characters of any kind so that from this point of view it does not even matter what letters you employ for any of the sounds, arabic letters would do just as well as Visible Speech if always used in the same phonetical sense.

But there is another and distinct use for phonetical writing, viz: — to represent phonetically the INCORRECT pronunciation of our pupils so that they can see the relation of their own pronunciation to ours.

In learning to shoot it is not only necessary that you should see the bulls eye but it is also necessary that you should know where you struck when you did NOT hit it. You must know the relation between the point struck and the bulls eye in order to become a good

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marksman; and our pupils should know the relation between the organic positions they assume in uttering a sound, and the positions we assume. Of course all this is clear to you and it will therefore be unnecessary to expand.

The point I want to make is this: That in using Visible Speech symbols we should have another object in view than the mere expression of our pronunciation. We want to correct the children's speech by writing down in the same symbols THEIR PRONUNCIATION. If the model pronunciation (that is ours) is impressed upon their memory by the much reading of books printed in symbols, then when we write their pronunciation in symbols they will unconsciously compare it with the model in their minds and observe the differences — in which case a phonetical representation will act as a corrective of defective speech as a view of the target and the point struck acts as a corrective to defective marksmanship.

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Now it seems to me important that we should bear in mind this corrective use of the symbols, and where for the sake of expediency we group together several distinct sounds, and use for them a single symbol, I think it would be well to choose that symbol which expresses most nearly the MEAN position for the group, rather than an extreme position. So that, when we try to correct an incorrect sound in a child we may have symbols to choose from all round the standard symbol.

Hence, if we must use one or other of the two symbols [??] and [??] my preference would be for the mid-position [??].

Feeling that in writing to you I am writing to a Visible Speech expert, I will go a little off the track and put in thoughts as they come to me quite irrespective of your questions.

In printing Visible Speech I should like to see an ELASTIC spelling. I don't think it would be a good plan to have pupils gain the idea that words must always be spelled in the same way. We are accustomed to look upon the written form of a word as fixed so that each

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variation is an ERROR, and this thought is so fixed in the mind that very slight errors in spelling convey the impression that a persons is not well educated. Young men and young women have found to their cost that poor spelling interferes with their prospects in life. Now we don't want to get this idea with Visible Speech, and for this reason, that people tolerate varieties of pronunciation to a certain extent. To this extent, therefore, should we tolerate varieties of symbolical expression. Hence, it is important that we should have clearly in mind the extent and limits of 5 variation tolerated among educated people, and be guided thereby in the extent of our variations of symbolization.

Considering broadly the three classes of sounds consonants, vowels, and glides, we may notice that people will not tolerate much variation in consonantal sounds, a defect of a consonant element suggests to ordinary minds an organic defect of speech, so that it is of the utmost consequence that we represent consonants specifically and clearly with very slight variations.

Vowels may be varied to a very considerable extent without conveying the idea that the person's speech is defective. Broad variations arouse the idea that the person speaking is a foreigner, and here it is important to observe that the extent of variation tolerated among the educated depends largely upon the degree or amount of oral aperture. Considerable variations exist even among educated persons in the pronunciation of large aperture vowels, but as the aperture is more and more constricted, the position resembling more and more the fricative position of a consonant, less and less variation will be tolerated. There is substantially no difference among educated persons in the pronunciation of the high vowels [??] and [??]; but low vowels like [??] and [??] are pronounced in very various ways by different speakers without attracting attention.

Diphthongal vowels, ending in a glide are the most variable elements of speech we have, usage tolerating the most extraordinary variations. A departure from the normal does not suggest the idea of a defect of speech hardly the idea of a foreign accent. The varieties are recognized rather as dialectal or individual peculiarities of utterance. We need not

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quarrel over the point whether we shall write i as [??] or [??] for probably both are 6 incorrect as expressing the normal or mean position. I presume that [??] would be nearer the mark. There are hardly two people who pronounce them alike. A Scotch man would say [??]

Now, what are we going to do with a diphthongal sound like this. I feel that we should tolerate and use varieties of spelling to the same extent that people tolerate and use varieties of pronunciation. I don't think we should try to fix in print what is not fixed in the mouths of ordinary speakers. I have hitherto employed [??] but on the principle of striking for the mean position in a group, I am not so sure but what [??] would be preferable to [??] or [??]

In criticizing Visible Speech writing I would criticize adversely any departure from the normal in the case of consonants and high vowels [??] and [??] but not hold variations from the normal in the case of other vowels or glides as ERRORS so long as they picture the speaker's actual pronunciation. Let a teacher write what she herself says and let us tolerate that spelling if we tolerate her pronunciation. I don't believe in fixity of spelling in writing phonetically for the deaf.

(Interrupted).

(Mr. Bell says to send this just as it is. He can only write to you in a fragmentary manner, dictating when he has time.

Private Secretary to Mr. Graham Bell.